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Us in a Small World:

A BFA in Dance Thesis Project

Project Description

Us in a Small World is an event of environmentalist performance art at Wild Goose Creative, co-produced by Livable Futures, a project of the Global Arts and Humanities Discovery Theme, and The Ohio State University Honors & Scholars Center. It was scheduled for March 29th, 2020, at 4 & 6 pm. However, due to the spread of COVID-19, this performance was canceled. The show design featured personal and solicited choreography, dance film, and music that deals with environmentalist themes. My personal choreographic project is an approximately fifteen-minute work built from five duets, each made with a different co-creator and drawing inspiration from a different animal. The overarching research question is how a piece of art can remind the audience and participants that they are a part of and connected to the natural world. The main objective of the work is to call for environmentally conscious action.

My choreographic contribution to *Us in a Small World* is a series of five, animal themed duets, titled “apocalypso.” The title takes from Sam Solnick’s work in *an Ecotopian Lexicon*; “apocalypso” refers to celebration, and particularly dancing, during end times or disaster. “Apocalypsos show us that although the situation may look (really) bad, you should not give up, because while some things are coming to an end, others are being born” (22). Making art as a reaction to or celebration of a changing, unstable world can help cultivate the thinking a culture

needs in order to properly grieve and create a new world. The goal of the choreography aligns with the show's – to connect performer and audience imaginations to the natural world. In her article, "Deep in Admiration" (which appears in *the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*), Ursula K. Le Guin writes "Skill in living, awareness of belonging to the world, delight in being part of the world, always tends to involve knowing our kinship as animals with animals" (15). To do this, each individual duet began with research into a specific animal (birds, monkeys, spiders, koi fish, and alligators). We watched videos of the animals moving, making observations about their habits, what it would feel like to move in that way, what the movement tells us about their personalities and priorities, and what it might look like to take on those qualities, patterns, and mannerisms into our own bodies. We used these observations to guide improvisation and movement generation, and from there, crafted the composition of the duet. The goal was not to anthropomorphize a nonhuman being, nor did we want to simply perform a symbol of the animal in question. Rather, we tried to parse out the essence of each animal, staying true to the personality markers but allowing the work to develop artistically from there.

My hope for "apocalypso" was that it would be detailed, specific, and showcase my working relationships with my close friends. In terms of performance, I wanted to give the audience a similar physical experience to the one the performers were having. It wasn't enough to create something visually striking – I wanted those observing to feel the echoes of the movement in their own bodies. I also wanted to remind the viewer that they are part of and closely connected to the natural world, even if their daily lives may severely blind them to that connection. Using Wild Goose Creative (a gallery space on Summit Street) brings the audience much closer to the performers than if the work were performed in a black box theater. It's easier

to decorate around the theme, and possible to bring in other performers in order to create an hour long show.

As a show, *Us in a Small World* continued my original goals with “apocalypso,” bringing in different forms of media and performers from different communities around campus. The program included: a section from Brianna Johnson’s MFA thesis project apart of *Extraterrestrial*; Sydney Samson’s senior thesis film titled “Natural Impact”; a solo from Sutton Coffey’s senior thesis titled “Same Flight”; and a performance from Chomp!, a DIY band in Columbus. In addition to the performances, a section of the budget was set aside for large potted plants, burlap, flowers, river stones, jugs of water, and other forms of foliage. In lieu of a park space, this ambiance would create an environment better suited to the goal of putting audiences in contact with a portion of the natural world. A portion of the performance program was dedicated to environmental concerns specific to Columbus, Ohio. These additional elements created a context for my personal work. It also allowed me to showcase other art makers, giving them access to this platform I had created, broadening our audience reach and impact.

In order to accomplish this, I took on a variety of roles within the production process. I fundraised, budgeted, rented a venue, solicited performers, wrote up contracts, purchased costumes, created a multimedia marketing plan, managed technological elements, designed the décor, and communicated with all performers and crew members about logistics. I have gained an increased understanding of the performance production process; designing and managing a performance became intrinsically linked to creating work for that venue.

Critical Analysis

“apocalypso” was built from five, short duets, performed sequentially so that the work read as one piece, composed of many. A series of vignettes served me because I was interested in particular moments of energy and how a collection of ideas could piece together into a whole. Theoretical concepts from haiku writing and Mark Haim’s “the Goldberg Variations” influenced my thinking around short forms and the vignette in dance performances.

The traditional haiku is a very short, Japanese poetic form. They are typically characterized by seventeen syllables, the juxtaposition of two images or ideas, and references to a particular season in the year (Poets.org). The haiku relies heavily on metaphor and strong imagery in order to create a complete work in a short space. In *How to Haiku*, Bruce Ross says that “a haiku is an insight into a moment of an experience” (55). There is particular emphasis on the sensory and emotional experience of a moment, with less connecting explanation or rhetoric. Ezra Pound writes that “the image itself is speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language” (Kenner 290). For Pound, the image functions for poetry in the same way that dance functions for language. It is able to communicate ideas in a way that explanatory prose sometimes cannot. In Pound’s famous poem, “In a Station of the Metro,” we see this sort of wordless depth in the images described.

“the apparition of these faces in the crowd;

petals in a wet, black bough” (Pound).

In two lines and a title, Pound cannot tell the reader how to read his work, or offer a pathway towards meaning making. The experience of the poem gives the reader the experience of the moment – a few brief, quick images, full of undescribed meaning, over before it’s just begun.

The classic Frog Pond poem, by Matsuo Basho, achieves the same wordless quality.

“An old pond!

A frog jumps in –

The sound of water” (Poets.org).

There are many variations of this translation, each another attempt to replicate the effect of the images with the language used. In this, even more than in Pound’s, the poem isn’t in the words themselves, but in the very tiny doorway into time that they open for the reader. The sensory experience is the key element that metaphor and brevity work towards in the haiku.

Mark Haim’s *the Goldberg Variations* is an eighty-minute dance work that uses poignant, self-contained vignettes as its driving structure. Each solo, performed by Haim, is presented as its own work – titled “Variation 1,” “Variation 2,” etc. They’re performed sequentially, with no changes in scenery and only a brief pause between sections of the music. Each unit is treated much the way a haiku is treated. Each is a brief moment to experience a certain sensation, which comes to an end before a new train of thought emerges. Haim’s work also shows how continuity can arise from a series of potentially disparate parts. Whatever the structure or content of the individual piece, there are markers that will signal to an audience that the piece is still a coherent part of the whole.

Each individual solo is made a single unit by the movement vocabulary and the structure, both signaled through repetition. “Variation 4,” for example, uses quick, direct spoking of the arms and legs out into space, away from the center of the body. We see the same shapes frequently: two arms at shoulder height, parallel to the floor; a lunge with the arms forming three o’clock; low diagonal crisscrossing with the arms and legs; a sprightly, floating jump from one leg to the same leg, the other extended to the side. As these shapes repeat, we recognize also the sequence that is also repeating, which creates a cyclical structure to the piece. At the end of the

variation, Haim calls on the juxtaposition as seen in haiku, moving away from rigid, walking patterns and relocating the established vocabulary into the air.

Another excellent example of juxtaposition and repetition is the connection between “Variation 8” and “Variation 9.” “Variation 8” uses a steady walk, pacing up and down the width of the stage, slowly traveling from right to left across the audience view. The stage is brightly lit, and Haim’s attitude is slightly more positive than neutral. “Variation 9,” in contrast, begins in darkness, and the light lifts only slightly throughout the piece. Haim repeatedly opens his chest to the sky, falling back and tracing his hands on the floor. Big, full bodied leaps, with coiling and swiping of the arms, are punctured by a fist to the sky, or an arms wide appeal to above. A staggering, stuttering walk nearly brings him to the floor. There’s a marked tone shift between these two pieces, one complicated, one simple, one cheeky, one full of drama. Their use next to each other creates the same effect that the juxtaposition within a haiku seeks to do. While they do not necessarily explain the other, they complement each other, and give the one a deeper sense of context and meaning than if they had been presented alone. The contrast is a crucial part of what makes the entire work read as a whole.

Contrast is the most complicated way that a series of vignettes can feel like a complete, dynamic work. Haim uses many simpler tools to signal a continual through line. His solo presence, in the same costume, in the same space, with the same musical source and without any change of curtain is the biggest marker of continuity within the work. The combined force of these elements is more than enough to account for a wide variety of choreographic choices. A few lighting changes and the shifts in physicality are the only real places where a clear shift from idea to idea can be seen. With so many constants, the eye can track a variety of new ideas without losing the sense of the whole.

My concern with these concepts – brevity, contrast, sensation, wordlessness, specificity, repetition, continuity markers – is mostly in their execution within my own project. I know that they work effectively in other’s hands, but will the work the way I want them to in my own? One major concern I had in regards to “apocalypso” was the way each vignette would mesh in its final form. I have achieved a satisfying variety of themes from each duet, but a major fear is that, when performed sequentially, they will lose some of their meaning, rather than gain it. I was also concerned about markers of continuity – “apocalypso” changes performers with each change in theme, and changes music, color, and in one case set as well. Would I be the main constant? Am I comfortable with my work being so centered around my own body, after so much rhetoric about a shared platform and non-human issues? Or would my constant presence drive the point of our constant subjectivity in a world that needs human attention? Additionally, as a show, did *Us in a Small World* manage time in a responsible way? I anticipated most sections averaging about five minutes each (with the potential exception of Chomp!). Would this even rate of change get boring after a while? Could one interlude support an otherwise monotone show? And in the quest for contrast and variety, will I end up with a program that is unfocused? These questions about wholeness cannot be answered, since the show remains theoretical.

Though ultimately still hypothetical, creating my own platform for “apocalypso” benefitted the work and my personal growth significantly. As the show and work developed simultaneously, I was able to make choreographic and production decisions that would positively impact the artistic quality of the other. Facings could take in mind the projected audience location, costumes could impact the foliage color scheme, or music choices could be modified with a live pianist. My biggest concern for the show, beyond wholeness, was its focus. Why was this work necessary at this specific moment? What was calling for it, beyond my interest? What

specifically did I want from my audience, and what did the other performers want? Were our goals in alignment? Is advocacy and awareness raising enough of a goal, or would I have done better to work towards something actionable? And, ultimately, is dance really the best way of achieving a politically charged goal? Would this show have been enough of a call? In general, the focus, urgency, and relevancy of the show concerns me. Was a general theme really the wisest decision?

Results

On March 9th, 2020, the Ohio State University shifted to online schooling for the remainder of the semester, due to the spread of COVID-19. During the next several weeks, gatherings of under one hundred, under fifty, under ten, and then of any kind were prohibited by the state of Ohio. In a global pandemic, the performing arts are the first to go. When OSU went on Spring Break, this show was in a place of swiftly gathering speed. “apocalypso” was nearly finished, the marketing plan was rolling, schedules and costumes were being distributed, a production crew had been gathered, music was being finalized, and the garden center shopping list was drawn up. It was deeply disheartening to let this project go, and even more difficult to settle into a world without a concert of any kind of the foreseeable future.

The rehearsal process for “apocalypso” was, for the most part, well documented. The first work choreographed was “Small Mouths, Big Lungs,” made with Laura Patterson during the OSU Dance Denmark study abroad trip in June, 2019. Based off birdsong, fast twitch reactions, and near flight experiences, this duet is the most narratively structured of the series. It has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and repeats a very narrow movement vocabulary. The sound is a recording of bird and plane sounds. “death Roll,” made with Sutton Coffey during January and

February 2020, was on its way to having a clear narrative arch as well. Working with alligators, this duet is deeply dramatic, full of slinky, heavy, expressive movement. It was choreographed to the “Four Cities: I. Sivas” cello sonata from Fazil Say. (currently untitled), made with Mia Williams, was part study and part slowly evolving relationship. The duet takes place seated at a table, and uses brisk hand shapes and patterns to echo the feeling of a spider. It is set to a metronome. “a different way of breathing” and “monkey business,” made with Meledi Montano and Anna Hershinow, respectively, were the two improvisation duets. “a different way of breathing” is based on the thought process and body habits of koi fish, and was made with two short Debussy pieces in mind, to be performed by Maddie Thompson. Meledi and I worked with ideas of floating (as seen in Gaga technique), navigating a current, and gently responding to changes in our environment. “monkey business,” which had no determined sound, used a balancing game as the improvisation score. Anna and I were interested in curvilinear, precarious shapes, and the puzzle of disrupting and finding balance. Each of these pieces needed a little editing, and a few needed to be ended, but the conceit and research were solidified by the time of cancelation.

Other tasks left included running “apocalypso” in its final form, editing it and giving the videographer (Abby Koskinas) and pianist (Maddie Thompson) a feel for the show, purchasing foliage, making a program, researching the program notes, solidifying audio/visual tech, hanging up posters, coordinating travel for the day of, and then of course managing the day of the show. The projected schedule was tight, given the amount of time available in the space. From 12-2, the production crew and I would load in all chairs, foliage, fabric, and etc., while those who had audio/visual tech needs would arrive and set those up. At 2, I planned to hold a production meeting, running through transitions and testing all of the technology and space needs. The

shows were scheduled for 4 and 6pm. Immediately after the second show, all persons involved with the show would help load everything out, cleaning and clearing the space by 8pm.

Future Goals

Where this work will go in the future is difficult to determine, due to the realities of living in a pandemic. In an ideal world, I want a week sometime in August to re-learn and rehearse “apocalypso,” and film it professionally in a park or garden space. In an ideal world, where a vaccine that typically takes ten to fifteen years to produce is available within a year or two, I want to return to this concept and refine it. My main goal would be to create a full length work, performed in the summer, outdoors. I want to research dance theater, in order to push the idea of specific and colorful movement vocabularies into a narrative context. As “apocalypso” exists currently, it’s a series of abstract nuggets, strung together and given meaning via the surrounding context. An evolved version of this project could include stronger through lines, with the dancing itself carrying some of the burden of meaning making. This would need to be done with care, so that the work doesn’t become didactic. Additionally, while producing this, I was concerned with “professional aesthetics” – I never want to appear gouache, home cooked, or informal. In order to produce this outside of OSU, I will want to develop my on individual artistic presence and build alliances with larger organizations. These are big hopes in a world where, to quote Octavia Butler, “the only lasting truth is change.” The world is still going to need to dance through catastrophe, but what shape that will take is beyond what I can imagine.

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